BX
4827
B57
A413
953c

Prisoner for God

LETTERS AND PAPERS FROM PRISON

by

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

EDITED BY EBERHARD BETHGE

TRANSLATED BY REGINALD H. FULLER

I
After Ten Years

TEN YEARS is a long stretch in a man's life. Time is the most precious gift in our possession, for it is the most irrevocable. This is what makes it so disturbing to look back upon time we have lost. Time lost is time when we have not lived a full human life, time unenriched by experience, creative endeavour, enjoyment and suffering. Time lost is time we have not filled, time left empty. The past ten years have not been like that. Our losses have been immeasurable, but we have not lost time. True, knowledge and experience, which are realized only in retrospect, are mere abstractions compared with the reality, compared with the life we have actually lived. But just as the capacity to forget is a gift of grace, so memory, the recalling of the lessons we have learnt, is an essential element in responsible living. In the following pages I hope to put on record some of the lessons we have learnt and the experiences we have shared during the past ten years. These are not just individual experiences; they are not arranged in an orderly way, there is no attempt to discuss them or to theorize about them. All I have done is to jot down as they come some of the discoveries made by a circle of like-minded friends, discoveries about the business of human life. The only connexion between them is that of concrete experience. There is nothing new or startling about them, for they have been known long before. But to us has been granted the privilege of learning them anew by first-hand experience. I cannot write a single word about these things without a deep sense of gratitude for the fellowship of spirit and community of life we have been allowed to enjoy and preserve throughout these years.

No Ground beneath our Feet

Surely there has never been a generation in the course of human history with so little ground under its feet as our own.

Every conceivable alternative seems equally intolerable. We try to escape from the present by looking entirely to the past or the future for our inspiration, and yet, without indulging in fanciful dreams, we are able to wait for the success of our cause in quietness and confidence. It may be however that the responsible, thinking people of earlier generations who stood at a turning-point of history felt just as we do, for the very reason that something new was being born which was not discernible in the alternatives of the present.

Who Stands his Ground?

The great masquerade of evil has wrought havoc with all our ethical preconceptions. This appearance of evil in the guise of light, beneficence and historical necessity is utterly bewildering to anyone nurtured in our traditional ethical systems. But for the Christian who frames his life on the Bible it simply confirms the radical evilness of evil.

The failure of rationalism is evident. With the best of intentions, but with a naïve lack of realism, the rationalist imagines that a small dose of reason will be enough to put the world right. In his short-sightedness he wants to do justice to all sides, but in the mêlée of conflicting forces he gets trampled upon without having achieved the slightest effect. Disappointed by the irrationality of the world, he realizes at last his futility, retires from the fray, and weakly surrenders to the winning side.

Worse still is the total collapse of moral fanaticism. The fanatic imagines that his moral purity will prove a match for the power of evil, but like a bull he goes for the red rag instead of the man who carries it, grows weary and succumbs. He becomes entangled with non-essentials and falls into the trap set by the superior ingenuity of his adversary.

Then there is the man with a conscience. He fights single-handed against overwhelming odds in situations which demand a decision. But there are so many conflicts going on, all of which demand some vital choice—with no advice or support save that of his own conscience—that he is torn to pieces.

14 of 195

Evil approaches him in so many specious and deceptive guises that his conscience becomes nervous and vacillating. In the end he contents himself with a salved instead of a clear conscience, and starts lying to his conscience as a means of avoiding despair. If a man relies exclusively on his conscience he fails to see how a bad conscience is sometimes more wholesome and strong than a deluded one.

When men are confronted by a bewildering variety of alternatives, the path of *duty* seems to offer a sure way out. They grasp at the imperative as the one certainty. The responsibility for the imperative rests upon its author, not upon its executor. But when men are confined to the limits of duty, they never risk a daring deed on their own responsibility, which is the only way to score a bull's eye against evil and defeat it. The man of duty will in the end be forced to give the devil his due.

What then of the man of *freedom*? He is the man who aspires to stand his ground in the world, who values the necessary deed more highly than a clear conscience or the duties of his calling, who is ready to sacrifice a barren principle for a fruitful compromise or a barren mediocrity for a fruitful radicalism. What then of him? He must beware lest his freedom should become his own undoing. For in choosing the lesser of two evils he may fail to see that the greater evil he seeks to avoid may prove the lesser. Here we have the raw material of tragedy.

Some seek refuge from the rough-and-tumble of public life in the sanctuary of their own private virtue. Such men however are compelled to seal their lips and shut their eyes to the injustice around them. Only at the cost of self-deception can they keep themselves pure from the defilements incurred by responsible action. For all that they achieve, that which they leave undone will still torment their peace of mind. They will either go to pieces in face of this disquiet, or develop into the most hypocritical of all Pharisees.

Who stands his ground? Only the man whose ultimate criterion is not in his reason, his principles, his conscience, his freedom or his virtue, but who is ready to sacrifice all these

things when he is called to obedient and responsible action in faith and exclusive allegiance to God. The responsible man seeks to make his whole life a response to the question and call of God.

Civil Courage?